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ABSTRACT

The importance of teaching culture in foreign language programs has long been recognized. The most exciting and promising new development in the teaching of culture is the appearance of introductory culture courses taught in English. The use of such courses has been advocated to lure reluctant students into language classes. If this is the primary justification for their existence, the profession is missing one of the greatest opportunities to solve our profession's most serious problems, as well as the opportunity to provide a very valuable facet of students' general education. The article "Many Colleges Reappraising Their Undergraduate Curricula," which appeared in the February 1977 issue of the "Chronicle of Higher Education," lists one of the six basic characteristics of the educated man or woman as "an awareness of other cultures and times." The foreign language teacher is the best qualified interpreter of foreign cultures, but in order to respond properly to the call for more and better culture courses, foreign language teachers need to be better prepared in cultural studies. This will require important changes in both undergraduate and graduate programs. (Author/CLK)

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Teaching Culture in English: Why Not?

by John W. Ferguson

Culture in one form or another has necessarily been taught in the foreign language classroom from the beginning - whenever that was. We have heard and read many times that language and culture are inseparable, that language is culture and so on. But only as recently as 25 years ago did language teachers begin to examine seriously what form and which aspects of culture should be taught and to what extent. Terms such as high culture, formal culture, and deep culture were soon popularized.

Everyone agreed that culture and civilization would be a valuable addition to language teaching for a multitude of reasons and so today it is nearly impossible to find a language text without cultural notes, and cultural readers abound, and AV materials of every description are readily available. Practically every language teacher has had the standard culture and civilization course as part of his/her undergraduate preparation. The more fortunate of these have had some degree of first-hand exposure to their adopted foreign culture through travel and study abroad. Culture is definitely "in". Any two teachers will disagree to some extent on what culture is and how it should be taught, but all will agree that it should be taught.

In recent years several new approaches to culture and civilization have been developed. I find the most exciting and

promising to be those that are taught in English at the elementary level. At the time I proposed the topic for this paper in February, I knew of only one such course, taught at a junior college in St. Louis. Since then I discovered many more, two of which have been described in articles published within the last year.

Edgar Frost and Norma Klayman (the authors of the aforementioned articles) both advocate teaching courses in English primarily for the purpose of attracting students to subsequent language study. Frost refers to such courses as "drawing cards," and Klayman tells us that they should be offered "to encourage young people to study foreign languages, not as a substitute for them." Although I believe in using these courses to lure reluctant students into the language classroom, I feel we are overlooking perhaps the greatest opportunity we have ever had to expand our curriculum into an area that will accomplish the following:

1. Solve the profession's enrollment and employment problems.
2. Greatly increase the respectability of language programs in the eyes of administrators, colleagues, and students.
3. Provide a very desirable and valuable facet of the general education of college and high school students.

4. Make a very significant contribution to the effort to make the world a better place to live in--and after all that's what the humanities are all about.

We are literally sitting on a rich educational gold mine and are barely beginning to scratch the surface as a profession, partly because we have been too preoccupied with the dwindling productivity of our old language and literature claims. I shall now attempt to substantiate these rather idealistic statements.

The inspiration for my paper came from an article entitled "Many Colleges Re-Appraising Their Undergraduate Curricula" which appeared in the Feb. 7, 1977 issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education. In this article we are told that "colleges and universities across the country...no longer are convinced that the freedom to choose courses that they granted students in the 1960's constitutes an adequate educational philosophy," and they are now reviewing their curriculums with an eye toward identifying "what is fundamental to undergraduate education." There is a great deal of concern among educators today because of the appalling ignorance among present college students in matters of politics, economics, history, science, technology, art, and culture. Steven Muller, President of Johns Hopkins University is quoted as saying, "We're turning out highly technical and

highly skilled people who are literally barbarians." (Of course, we in the humanities have been saying the same thing for many years.)

The article then gives "Six Basic Characteristics" of the educated man or woman as proposed by Harvard University. The third of these characteristics listed is "An awareness of other cultures and other times."

The interest in culture and the recognition of its educational value appear to be greater than ever in our changing world. More educators are finally beginning to realize more fully that cultural studies bring an awareness of self, and everyone is quite familiar with the sagacious admonition "Know thyself!" as the ultimate quest in life. We also know how the study of foreign culture helps students understand and appreciate their own culture. Few studies promise more rewarding or vitally important benefits. And who among our educators are the best interpreters of foreign cultures? Generally speaking, the foreign language teachers are obviously the better equipped than anyone else to perform this function. Even most social scientists will agree with this conclusion, albeit with certain reservations. All foreign language teachers recognize this as one of their professional tasks, and many, such as Robert G. Mead, see this as our primary responsibility. In the September 1970 issue of Hispania he said:

"The main purpose of a student majoring in Spanish in a humanities program is that of any foreign language student: to be a transmitter of culture... He will conceive his essential mission to be the interpretation of culture to North Americans... all else will be secondary."

When Mead wrote these words, he envisioned an increasing number of North American students diligently pursuing language study through which they would be exposed to foreign cultures. In the same article, he advocates teaching the culture in Spanish.

If we as a profession seriously accept the challenge of imparting to our students the cultural knowledge we believe to be so indispensible to their education, we must seek other avenues through which this can be accomplished. In 1970 language requirements and enrollment were falling at a very alarming rate and even today statistics are not too encouraging. Nevertheless we can still be effective transmitters of culture in the traditional foreign language classroom, but the "transmittees" are entirely too few in number. We need a better vehicle that will enable us to reach a more significant percentage of student populations. The solution to the problem should be obvious: teach culture classes at the lower division level in English. We should have taken advantage of this opportunity years ago, but much like Frost, Klayman, Mead, and others, we were loath to resort to anything that would

threaten the sanctity of the traditional foreign language curriculum. Furthermore, English was taboo; it defeated our purpose; it was to be avoided and banished from the classroom. Even now as I speak to you about this, how many here feel somewhat uneasy about the prospect of teaching a class in English in a foreign language department? Yet it is interesting to point out that literature in translation classes have been around for many years and met with very little resistance from language teachers or even English teachers, who are always happy to teach our literature for us. Was this because we felt that foreign literature was our indisputable domain and because many literature classes were already commonly conducted in English? I believe so.

But we are apparently less convinced that we have a legitimate claim on culture, especially deep culture, more especially if we teach it in English. After all, what will the anthropologists say? I can tell you from recent personal experience what many will say if they suspect we are attempting to teach anthropology. They will object vehemently and our new course proposals will be rejected unanimously by curriculum committees.

Let me tell you about our sad experience at Murray--you may benefit from our mistakes. After I saw the light last year, I proposed a new course called "Hispanic Culture" to be taught in English. At the time I didn't feel it necessary to defend its

content or its being taught in English. I merely pointed out the need for the course and described it briefly. Some of our department members were skeptical about it but were more or less in favor of experimenting with it. When it was presented to our curriculum committee, it was attacked with unprecedented fury by intimidated colleagues who were appalled by our audacity. The idea of teaching a foreign language class in English nearly blew their minds. "Foreign Language courses should be taught in the foreign language (they learned that from us), culture should be taught by anthropologists, history should be taught by historians," they insisted. The course was voted against by everyone except one of our own two representatives. This was the first time a proposal had been rejected by this particular committee.

I refused to accept defeat and reworked the proposal, which grew from two pages to twenty-one. I made a strong case for our claim to teaching general culture as a traditional and legitimate part of our curriculum. Since the main objections concerning the content came from anthropology and history, I prepared a sample syllabus showing that material from each of these two disciplines would constitute only a relatively small part of the course. I also pointed out that every department "infringes" upon other disciplines to some extent. History teaches political science, economics, geography, etc. Anthropology includes a multitude of

subjects claimed by other departments such as history, sociology, philosophy, and even languages. In other words, there are no precise, sacrosanct boundaries between departmentalized fields of knowledge. A general culture course must necessarily include material from many disciplines but does not infringe upon any of these to any objectional degree. I then searched through several university catalogs and found to my surprise and delight that there are quite a few foreign language departments that already have culture courses taught in English. These include Alabama, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, Stanford, Purdue, and UCLA. This evidence added a great deal of weight to my argument and just last week the chairman of the history department said he would support the proposal when I resubmit it. The moral to this story is: If you propose a culture course in English, be sure you defend and justify it thoroughly the first time. It is sometimes much more difficult to get approval after it has been rejected once.

Back to the courses taught at other universities. Although I found several, I discovered that most of them dealt with countries and areas whose languages are not widely taught in the U.S. such as Italy, Japan, Portugal, Scandinavia, and Russia - although Russian is still a widely taught language. Only two of these few departments offered these courses in all popular languages, although I am sure there are several others that I do not

know about. The University of Missouri has several taught at the elementary level, and I understand that they draw hundreds of students each semester.

The kind of course which I have proposed at Murray includes both formal and informal culture namely history, history of the language, literature, art, architecture, music, dance, government, education, business, industry, religion, values, mores, customs, social classes, the home, and recreation--a real potpourri, focusing on contemporary culture. Hardly an in-depth study. But even so I'm not at all confident that I am well prepared to teach it. Eventually I would like to develop more specialized courses which would permit greater depth, but I fear that this would require long hours of preparation on my part to teach such classes effectively. I also feel a definite need to spend a great deal of time in Spanish-speaking countries in order to feel very qualified as a teacher of Spanish culture.

This lack of preparation on my part brings me to my concluding and perhaps most important point. We have heard many loud pleas in the past for some basic changes in foreign language teacher preparation - both undergraduate and graduate. I have made several myself as a graduate student and as a teacher - to no great avail. I discovered long ago that education is highly resistant to change; tradition tends to prevail. But we must continue to try. What I

would like to see (because who am I to propose major changes) is the development of culturally-oriented programs at some of the major universities which would specialize in culture instead of literature although literature would obviously still be studied. These programs as I envision them would require a long residence in the countries whose culture is studied, designed to familiarize students intimately with every aspect of life in these lands. They would also provide methods classes which would teach students how to prepare and present cultural materials effectively.

I realize that there are many good programs around that fit part of this basic description, but the fact remains that literature continues to reign supreme. Our students want a choice. Both majors and non-majors. Those who would never study a language may be very interested in a culture course taught in English. The day may come when culture courses rather than language courses (or along with language courses) become part of general educational requirements. Such requirements could certainly be more easily justified and defended. But such courses must first exist.

So again I say that we have at our disposal an option of great potential - lower-division culture courses taught in English whose primary raison d'être is not to attract students into traditional language classes but rather to provide a valid and

valuable facet of a general education. We should teach them as a highly desirable end, not as a means to an end. Their content and purpose are sufficient justification of their existence.

To add weight to this point, let me relate what happened at Murray with our "Cultural Introduction to Foreign Languages." This course was designed to attract students into our traditional language program. When we first taught it in 1974, we enrolled only fourteen students. This fall (1977) we closed the class at forty-three. The class itself has obviously done very well. But it has failed to bring significant numbers of students into our regular classes. Are we disappointed? Not at all. The success of the course itself has increased our enrollment considerably. We want more culture courses now to further increase our enrollment, but more importantly (speaking as an unselfish educator), they will provide an interesting and valuable part of the students' education.

The time is right to take advantage of the opportunity to create more of these, and I would urge everyone to do so - at least on an experimental basis. There is no other way to determine whether or not the benefits would be worth the effort at any one college or high school. And who knows, the benefits may surpass our fondest dreams and even the wild claims which I have made here today.